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ABSTRACT

This study examines middle school teachers', absentee students', and their parents' perceptions of factors related to excessive school absences; perceptions of the degree to which they think they can contribute a solution to the problem; and expectations regarding one another's responsibility for the problem. Data was obtained from middle school teachers (N=9); middle school students (N=10) who had excessive school absences; and several parents (N=7), all who lived in the Taipei county of Taiwan. The data showed that although some teachers were able to identify factors related to excessive school absences from the three domains, most teachers tended to imply that the family factor was the main cause of the absentee problem. Parents were not sure about the reasons for their children's school absences and did not know what to do for their students. Absentee students showed little intention of solving the problem by themselves and expected assistance from either their schools or their family. The results provide information on teachers', students', and parents' perceptions of the school absence problem and offer suggestions on the development of effective intervention programs. To begin with, parents, teachers, and absentee students need to share their perceptions and difficulties with each other. Messages also need to be sent to students that teachers and parents will be working together on the school absence problem and that they are part of the team. (JDM)

Perceptions of school dropout: Different viewpoints among middle school teachers, absentee students, and their parents in Taiwan

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Perceptions of school dropout: Different viewpoints among middle school teachers, absentee students, and their parents in Taiwan

In Taiwan, students who drop out of school without a junior high school diploma have drawn increased attention in the past few years. Research has shown that school dropout is a multifactored problem involving factors in three domains -- student, family, and school characteristics. A solution that targets a single area for treatment is unlikely to be effective because these three factors are interrelated. Therefore, success in preventing student dropout is more probable if parents, students and teachers share their perspectives on the problem and recognize the role that they can play in prevention programs. Moreover, the prevention should target students who have excessive school absences, because missing school is the most potent predictor of dropping out of school prematurely.

The purpose of this study was to examine middle school teachers', absentee students', and their parents' (a) perceptions of factors related to excessive school absences, (b) perceptions of the degree to which they think that they can contribute to the solution to this problem, and (c) expectations regarding one another's responsibility for this problem. Qualitative data were obtained from interviews with 9 middle school teachers, 10 students who had excessive school absences and were

evaluated by the students' counselors as at-risk for dropping out, and the 7 students' parents, in Taipei county, Taiwan. In-depth interviews were viewed as the most appropriate method for exploring this issue and understanding the problem from diverse perspectives. The data showed that, though some teachers were able to identify factors related to excessive school absences from three domains, most teachers tended to imply that the family factor is the main cause of the absentee problem. On the other hand, parents were not sure about the reasons for their children's school absences and did not know what to do themselves. Parents expected schools to do something about it or their children to "get back to track" one day by themselves. As for the students, a typical response of them was that they were careless, or powerless about the situation. Absentee students showed little intention of solving the problem by themselves; they expected assistance from either schools or their family.

An obvious gap among teachers', students' and parents' perceptions and expectations for one another was found in this study. To fill the gap, teachers, absentee students, and their parents should share their perceptions and difficulties with each other. For teachers and parents, in addition to expecting assistance from each other, recognition of the contribution that they can make toward solving the problem should be emphasized. Messages should also be sent to students that

teachers and parents will be working together on the school absence problem, and that students are part of the team, too. This study provides a better understanding of teachers', students', and parents' perceptions of the school absence problem and makes suggestions on the development of effective intervention programs.

Introduction

Viewing school dropout as a multicausal problem has already been clearly suggested by the researchers. Factors from three domains have been identified: personal characteristics of the students, characteristics of the family, and characteristics of the school. Students who have a lower academic self-concept, self-esteem and social competence, and a higher prevalence of neuroticism are more likely to drop out of school prematurely (Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Reid, 1982; Southworth, 1992). The family factor mainly involves family relationships. The truants' families are less likely to be well functioning. Absentee students are more likely to perceive parental discipline as lax or inconsistent, and to perceive stronger attempts of parental control. They are also more likely to experience family conflict (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). In regard to the school factor, lack of interest in the school curriculum as well as strained and contentious teacher-pupil relations have been reported by several studies (Bealing, 1990; Corville-Smith et al., 1998).

Corville-Smith et al.'s study suggested that students' perceptions of their school, rather than family's or students' characteristics, were the most prominent factor in distinguishing absentee students from regular attendees. Janosz et al.'s study (1997) also indicated that school experiences (i.e., grad retention, school achievement, school commitment) were the best screening variables for potential dropouts.

From the literature on the school absence and dropout problem, it has been recommended that a joint effort should be made by the three parties—absentee students, family, and school. While the “team effort” has been suggested, there is a need to understand if students, teachers, and parents all share the same viewpoint on this issue. What do they view as the cause of the problem? What are the roles they see themselves playing in terms of solving the problem? Most previous research has been focused on the determinants of why students drop out of school and intervention programs. This study examined the factors that prevent teachers, absentee students, and parents from working together through analyzing the perceptions from the three parties in terms of the problem of dropping out of school.

Purposes of the study

There were three purposes to this study: (a) to understand teachers', absentee students', and parents' perceptions and difficulties in terms of the school dropout

problem; (b) to analyze the similarities and differences of the viewpoints among teachers, absentee students, and parents; (c) to promote the three parties to work together.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study were middle school teachers, absentee students, and their parents. The researcher randomly selected three middle schools in Taipei County and contacted the personnel in the student counselors' office who in turn recruited the teachers willing to be interviewed. Three teachers from each school took part in this study and each of them has worked in the school for different lengths of time (less than 5 years, five to 10 years, and 11 years or more). The student counselor from each school also referred 3 to 4 students, who had excessive school absences and were evaluated as at-risk of dropping out, to participate in this study. Finally, we also interviewed the parents of these candidate students on the phone. In total, nine teachers, ten students and seven parents were interviewed including five female teachers, four male teachers, one female student, nine male students, four mothers and three fathers. Six out of seven parents were interviewed and their children also participated in this study. Only one child of a participating parent was

not interviewed because he did not come to school. We failed to interview the parents for the remaining 3 students.

Procedure

An unstructured interview procedure was used in this study. All participants received an individual interview. The interviewer asked teachers to share their teaching experiences and opinions about the student dropout problem for approximately 45 minutes. Each parent (either father or mother) was told that the interview would help the school know their children better. The parents agreed to be interviewed by phone for approximately 30 minutes. Regarding the students, the interviewer told the students that the interview would help the school know how they were doing at home as well as at school. The length of the student interviews ranged from 30 minutes to three hours based on the students' willingness to communicate or disclose personal information. Mandarin was the language used in the interviews and all interviews were recorded on audiocassette, except for the parents' phone interviews.

Results

Teachers' perceptions

In discussing their experience, teachers mainly focused on academic matters.

The teachers talked a great deal about how they have tried to get the students to study.

The most common strategy that the teachers employed was “the use of both tough and

soft methods.” For example, two teachers said that when they were new at the

school, senior teachers would advise them to be strict with the students in the very

beginning. Being too “soft” would lead the students to believe that listening to the

teacher is an option. Punishment was also the common discipline strategy practiced

by the teachers. However, several teachers emphasized that they did encourage the

students and showed their caring to them. As a result, when the students got

punished in class, they could accept the punishment. Punishment and displays of

caring as well as encouragement at appropriate times was the so-called “use of both

tough and soft methods.” “Fairness” was also a word frequently mentioned by the

teachers. As one teacher stated, “It is not true that students do not like strict

teachers. What they really don't like is a teacher who is not fair to the students.”

In regard to the student dropout problem, all of the interviewed teachers stressed that the family played an important role. Three of the nine teachers' initial responses

to the cause of why student drop out were the family factor. However, all teachers except one also stated that other factors including student and school characteristics contributed to the student dropout problem in some degree. Student characteristics included “lack of life goals”, “contempt for the value of education” and “laziness.” School characteristics referred to “poor peer relationships” and “inability to understand the lectures.” All teachers described that frequent napping in class was a common behavior for the at-risk students, because the teachers’ lectures were like a “foreign” language to them.

Teachers’ opinions on how to assist the at-risk students also reflected what they thought was the cause of the students’ dropout problem. Two teachers attributing the students’ dropout problem to the family factor believed that they could do nothing to help the students. One teacher stated that “A teacher could not discipline a child who came from a family with no discipline.” Another teacher expressed that “There was no way for the students to change and maybe the only way for them to change was to have new parents.” The remaining teachers said that they would encourage the students and show their caring to them. As for those students “sleeping all day”, however, most teachers did not know what to do and said how difficult it was to teach a class of students with great differences in academic levels. Only one teacher

mentioned that she would work on the curriculum and try to make the courses more appealing to the students.

Parents' perceptions

Half of the interviewed parents reported that they did not know how their child was doing at school. These parents said that their child usually did not say anything to them when they got home from school. When talking about their child, three parents depicted their child's positive characteristics, and did not indicate serious problems with their child. "He just plays too much," stated one of the three mothers. The remaining four parents thought that their children had problems, but only one of them felt he knew the reason. One father said, "Ever since my son became addicted to the computer, he has totally changed." The other three mothers wondered why their child had problems and have tried to find a reason to explain it. One of these three mothers stated that her child's problem may stem from the fact that she nor her husband took care of the child in his childhood and thus the boy was not close to them. Another mother stated her child's problems may be due to the father's death. The last mother could not figure out a reason. She stated, "In the family like ours, I really don't know how he turned out like this."

As for how to assist the child, parents had two types of reactions. Four of the seven parents expressed one type of reaction: they do not know what to do. For

example, one of these four mothers said, “I have already given up. I really do not know what else I can do.” Another said that she would wait until the child got back on track by himself. The other three of the seven interviewed parents expressed the second type of reaction: they would try to persuade their child to “be good”. Though they were not sure about the effect, it was all that they could see to do at the time.

Students’ perceptions

Three of the ten students came from single-parent families. They were all males and lived with their fathers. Two students mentioned domestic violence in their family. One student stated his father would beat him and his mother. In terms of the students’ perception of parental discipline, five students stated that their parents were fairly lax with them.

Concerning their school experiences, “boring” and “no interest or talent in school work” were typical student responses. One student stated, “I don’t have any school experience. I basically slept all day when I was at school.” Two students indicated that they did not have good relations with either teachers or classmates. Another student said that “Teachers don’t like me, because I have bad grades. Sometimes when I get good grades, the teacher thinks that I cheat.” However, two students clearly stated that they have quite a few good friends at school. Two students indicated that they got along well with both their teachers and peers at

school. As for their expectations of school, several students stated that they hoped that the teachers would not be harsh to them and would not give them any pressure.

Another common phenomenon among the students was that most of them devoted themselves to one activity, which was viewed as exciting to them. Five students stated that they were involved in many fights. One of the 5 students explained that “It is really exciting to be chased by the cops.” Another three students told the interviewer that they like to play on the computer. One student said, “I like to make computer viruses and destroy other people’s computer programs.”

Discussion

It is obvious that there is a gap among teachers’, students’ and parents’ perceptions of dropping out of school and the expectations they have for one another. Potential obstacles preventing the three parties from solving the problem together, and the implications of intervention program will be discussed below.

Parents were not aware of or were hesitant to admit to their child’s problem

From paired parent-child interviews, it was found that some children did have serious problem behaviors (e.g., gang fighting, selling drugs and excessive school absence), but their parents did not seem to know about their children’s involvement.

In the parents' interviews, we did not see that the parents realized what their child was doing. It is understood that it may be due to the hesitation of disclosing sensitive information to the interviewer. However, it may also indicate that the parents were not aware of their child's problem, or were subconsciously refusing to recognize the problems. Parents should be informed of their child's problems, thus they would be encouraged to take a more active role in assisting the child.

Teachers expected parents to “do their job”, but parents did not know what to do

Teachers considered the family factor as a main cause contributing to students' dropout problem. Teachers thought that they have already done what they could do at school, and expected parents to “do their job” at home. As mentioned above, some parents were unaware of their child's problems. The parents' interviews also showed that parents did not know what to do about the problems, and did not recognize the important role they played in this issue. There was a gap between teachers' expectation and parents' perceptions and abilities. Communication between teachers and parents should be well established. A parenting education program is also needed to provide assistance to these parents.

Students' apathy and powerless attitude also reflected teachers' and parents' helplessness

Boredom in school and academic failure were the most prominent reasons for school absence that students mentioned. Students were apathy about their problems, and showed little intention of solving them by themselves. They did not expect assistance from their schools or their family, either. Their attitudes actually reflected the helplessness their teachers and parents felt. Though some teachers said they would show their concern and encourage the students, they also admitted that they did not know how to teach students with poor academic skills. As for the parents, there was no way for them to help their children with their school work. A sense of helplessness thus spread among the three parties. Students were at heightened risk to be trapped in this cycle leading to dropping out of school..

In response to the students' perceptions of their school experiences, improvement in the quality of the instruction and the curriculum is needed urgently. Teachers would need assistance planning the curriculum. Though parents are not able to help their child with the school work, their support may play a role in raising students' vulnerability to school stress. For the children, it is expected that as the teachers and parents work together to assist them, the children would then be motivated to contribute their efforts and join the team, too.

This study promotes the better understanding of perceptions among absentee students, teachers, and parents. Though teachers, parents and students themselves all

need to work on preventing students from dropping out of school, teachers may need to be the first one in line to start the effort. More attractive curricula, and more positive experiences provided at school would be the most important things to be worked on in order to keep the students at school in the first place. It is also imperative that the Ministry of Education reevaluate the entire middle school curriculum in order to assist the teachers to teach students with great differences in academic levels. Teachers with experience in alternative schools are also needed to share their experiences with the middle school teachers in terms of how to work with students with poor school achievement and commitment. Secondly, teachers along with other professionals would need to assist the parents in providing a supportive environment at home for their children. It is unrealistic to expect parents to “do their job” by themselves. Finally, it is believed that children would then have higher academic aspirations and achievement, and the positive experiences at school would offset the negative impact of their personal characteristics.

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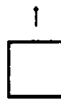
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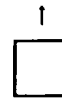
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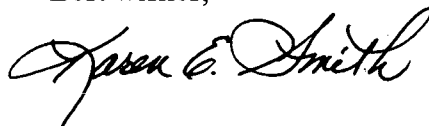
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